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Christian Strategy in the Near East

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DIVISION OF FOREIGN MISSIONS

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IT has been said that the measure of a man is found in what he is up against, as definitely as in what he may be in himself. On that basis, the Christian Church in the Near East is greater than it seems at first sight. One living there is constantly reminded of the phrase of the Apostle Paul about the open door *and* many adversaries.

That sense of living in the company of the early Church is never far from a Christian living in the Near East today. There are, of course, the geographical reminders:—Jerusalem, and Galilee, and Antioch, and Ephesus, and all the rest. Behind that there lies the unchanging pattern of much of life. "I know the Bible is true," says Pastor Rihany in *Our Syrian Christ*, "Because it reads like a letter from home." Even in the more general situation, the Near East is still the Crossroads of the World, as in Jesus' time. Foreigners were always present. Rome furnished the charge of Imperialism in that day. Many people, both pagan and Jew, found the western way of life more attractive than their own. The people of Jesus' time, as Professor Olmstead reminds us, "Called themselves Romans, spoke Greek, and thought in Aramaic." The problem of conflicting loyalties was as strong then, as now.

It may be a digression, thus early in this address, to suggest that Christianity would, in all likelihood, have died out as a Jewish sect, had Our Lord not have been born in a time of Hellenistic predominance in Palestine. It is a second digression to remark that Islam was born into the same pseudo-Hellenic atmosphere, and belongs to this day on the Western side of any basic East-West conflict that may be found in the basic philosophies of the world.

That omnipresence of history is, however, one of the difficulties faced by the Christian Church in the Near East. From the early times, five and a half millennia ago, when civilization was born in the Near East, there have passed across the stage of those lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean most of the great actors in the pageant of human history. From that great drama there now remain, as minorities in the Near East, living representatives of nearly every scene in that pageant, each trying to keep alive, or to re-enact on the stage of history,

the great Day of his particular people. The preoccupation with history comes right down into the churches of the Near East today, with the consequence that there are twenty-four kinds of Christian services in the single city of Aleppo every Sunday. Add the non-Christian sects and minorities, and such a city becomes a veritable human museum. One would wish, sometimes, that he could wipe it all out and start over!

One effect of that long and troubled history has been to give to each religious community a solidarity and an administrative autonomy which in any other setting would belong to a political grouping. "Nationality" and "religion" are inextricably confused, from our point of view, in the thinking of the Near East. Some of you here present know how I came to be interested in this particular aspect of life in the Orient. It all came out of a particular incident, at the end of my first year in Turkey. Re-entering that land, after a summer trip to Palestine, I found myself standing before two policemen. One took my passport in his hand. The other opened a big register, in which he would write down all the answers. In my simple Turkish I explained where I was going, and why; where I had been born, and when; the names of my father and mother, and all the rest. Then the officer asked me my nationality (using the term "milla" which had come into my vocabulary as the exact term for "nation"). I said that I was an American. The man looked a bit puzzled, and repeated his question as to my nationality. With some impatience I turned my passport over in his hands, and pointed to the "United States of America" stamped on the cover. "I am an American, you see," I said.

"No," he said, "I don't mean that. What is your *real* nationality; what is your religion?"

Before I could answer the second policeman looked up and said, "Don't you know? Americans have no religion!" At first I was merely amused; but thinking it over I came to realize that he was a wise observer. He knew that one does not have to be Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or something else in order to be an American; and we do not have any mark of religion in our passports.

That sense of the solidarity of religion and polit-

ical community carries with it large implications for the Christian Church in the Near East. While it gives each religious community considerable freedom within its own boundaries, it makes transfer from one group to another all but impossible. One who turns to another faith is not only an apostate, but a renegade and a traitor, as well. Even the member of the Armenian Orthodox Church who becomes an Armenian Protestant is considered one step less an Armenian by the transfer. There are plenty of atheists in Israel, seemingly without objection from the authorities, but a Jew who turns Christian or Muslim is practically cast out from his people. Would that religion in the Near East could regain the simple status of a matter of spiritual conviction! The paper by Professor Levonian, in the latest issue of the Bulletin of Union Theological Seminary, deserves a careful reading at this point. Even the Protestant Churches, by their recognition as a separate "millet" have come into the category of the stereotyped, politico-religious communities.

Dr. James K. Quay of Princeton Theological Seminary, made at Buck Hill Falls, two years ago, a statement that many of you will remember, and none of us should ever forget:—"We are proud to be the heirs of the great days of the Church Victorious, but none of us like to be the heirs of her mistakes." Yet in the Near East, we must accept that inheritance. Had there been a live Christian Church in Arabia in the sixth century, there would in all probability have been no such thing as Islam ever since. Had there been no Crusades, the later relations of Christian and Muslim might have been far different from what they have actually been. Had the Orthodox Churches survived centuries of persecution by more than the skin of their teeth, their attitude to the problems of modern life would have been much more alert. Christianity did survive marvellously, but by a sort of divine stubbornness, a deadly conservatism, a process of encrustation like the cucoon of the silk-worm or the spore of some plants. And now to treat the Orthodox as subject to "conversion" to evangelical ideas is merely to prolong that defensive isolation of the Orthodox Churches. Yet to work along with them, moving no faster than they can go with us in broth-

erly cooperation, will be to slow down the active programs of the Protestant Movement by many years.

The presence of many Christians over the years—a few of them great examples of Christianity, many of them Christians in name only, and all of them circumscribed by the inflexible boundaries of hard and fast religious “communities”—is another of the facts limiting the life of the Christian Church in the Near East today. The Gospel is hardly “news” at all, to say nothing of being “good news,” with so many varieties of “Christians” part of the furnishings of the stage of human society through so many centuries.

If that sounds like unfair criticism of the Christians in the Near and Middle East, remember that all that part of the world has been through centuries of fragmentation, and fear, misgovernment, depopulation, disease, discord, foreign domination, and instability. Many of the characteristics of the Near Easterner, Muslim and Christian alike, are a direct outcome of that fact. I cite their ability to wait, their power to “muddle through,” and a certain deviousness of manner that seems insincere to an outsider—but which is not deceitful at all if you know the system as they know it. A writer about Iran gave the best expression I know for that aspect of life in the Near East when he said that Iran has suffered from many centuries of exploitation, and during those centuries has learned very cleverly to exploit the exploiter.

The result is, in most cases, what might be called a minority-mentality:—the ability to conceal one’s real feelings; the art of making the most of a bad bargain; political opportunism; and an aptness for the negative approach to any problem. An Arab friend summed it all up by saying, “The trouble with us is that we are never quite serious about anything!”

The coming of “independence” to most of the Near East, between 1918 and 1946, has not ended these problems of adjustment. Freedom of travel, and exposure to new ideas—the autobus and the moving picture, in particular—have kept whole populations on the move and social and intellectual life in turmoil. The discovery of the major oil re-

serves of the world beneath the soil of the Near East has only increased the constant pressure of the outside world upon this ancient Crossroads of the World. The events in Palestine have had a most profoundly disturbing effect upon the stability of the Arabic-speaking world.

There is a summary of the background:—confused enough when one comes to know it, and more than confusing when one tries to picture it to others. Against that background, what should be the strategy of the Christian Church today? I suggest four steps.

1) Keep perspective on it all. This is a struggle starting from Jerusalem at Pentecost, and reaching up through all the varied history ever since. The Christian Church may be considered by many merely part of the stage-setting of history, but it is at least an accepted part of the furnishings of society in the Near East. There have been many periods when it was progress merely to keep on keeping on. The Custodian of the Holy Land, for the Franciscan Order remarked casually to me one day, "We have learned through 700 years experience in the Muslim World that it is real religious liberty to be free to educate our own people in our own way." The population of the Near Eastern countries is a tough-minded, devoted population, with great possibilities inherent in it. Doctor Paul Harrison tells of warning an old sheikh, brought in for the treatment of gunshot wounds, saying, "Look out, you might get killed some day if you go on fighting like that."

"Sure enough," said the old man, "Who wants to die lying in a bed?" To which Paul Harrison comments, "What a few men of that mettle would do in the Christian Church in Arabia!"

In the Missionary Movement all has not been clear sailing in the Near East, but there have been many lessons learned. Thomas Edison once confessed to a friend that he had tried 800 ways, unsuccessfully, to perform a certain operation needed in the electric lamp.

"What a pity," said the friend, "to have wasted all that time and effort."

"Not at all," said Mr. Edison, "Now I know 800 ways not to do it."

And in the meanwhile there has been a steady witness, by word and life, through all the agencies of the Christian Church in the Near East. When one thinks of the life of Cyril Haas, to take just one out of hundreds, as an illustration, one cannot but think of the words of Thomas à Kempis:

"No little thing it is to spend one's life in one small spot of earth, and gather up the fragments of his days in happiness." Much has been done. Much is being done. And in the providence of God the seed sown shall never fail its harvest.

2) The second suggestion is that we be fearless in experimentation. The methods tried in the past are not sacrosanct. In essence a missionary is but a Christian set down in a non-Christian environment, under the obligation to live out in *every* relationship of life the implications of his faith. Where those relationships are as rich and as varied as they are in the Near East, who knows what doors will open. When one remembers that we Christian educationalists are trusted with the best youth of the Muslim world—and we not only foreigners but infidels, as well—the faith of those parents is phenomenal. When one remembers the blunders we have made—both individually and as part of the "Christian" world—we can only thank God that we have not been "dealt with after our sins nor rewarded according to our iniquities."

3) The third suggestion is that we work on many levels at once. I think of our various relationships as a series of concentric circles, rising one above the other from a broad base at the bottom to a small circle at the top.

On the lowest level we must work for all men, regardless of their race, creed, and personal characteristics. It is on that basis that we treat all men as our fellows, and respond to their common need. The refugees are an example here, and none of us living in that area can be indifferent to their need, as human beings.

The second level is where we begin to sort people out according to their personal ideals and char-

acteristics. It is too easy to generalize in life, and forget that individual differences are more significant than the group distinctions that are more visible to the eye. Once when I was acting Principal of the College at Tarus we caught a Turkish lad with a set of exam questions in one hand, and the key to a teachers room in the other. It seemed a clear case, but it was my duty as Principal to call him before the faculty and question him. With each successive reply he got in deeper and deeper. Finally I said to him, "See here Ahmed, why don't you tell us the truth?"

Eager to clear himself by the safe generalization, he shouted, "Do you say that Turks are liars?" Fortunately I had not had to reply before a Turkish teacher spoke up and said,

"Ahmed. A good Turk does not lie, but *you* lied!"

So we learn to pick the individual out of his group, and find even among men of very different background persons who are closer to ourselves in ideals and in point of view. With them, regardless of race or creed, we can often work shoulder to shoulder for the building of a better world.

The third circle, yet smaller and higher in the scale, is the group of Christians differing from ourselves in creed, sect, or background, with whom we can share, however dimly, the common inspiration and the common discipline of the Gospels. It may take years of simple friendship and common devotion to limited practical tasks to win even them through to the level of sympathetic understanding of what we try to say when we talk of our Mission in the world.

The members of the fourth circle may be drawn from either of the groups just mentioned. There should come out, with the years, a limited number of persons with whom we have earned the right to talk of spiritual things, with the expectation that real fellowship may be developed. They may or may not at once enter the category of "inquirers." Quite certainly (in the Near East) our ecclesiastical forms will mystify, if not repel them, at first. Yet the Near East is peopled with many such, each too isolated from his fellows, yet linked by a dawning loyalty to Jesus as "The pioneer of life." One group in Turkey calls itself "Jesusists" (Remember that the term

Christian preempted, in their vocabulary, by the traditional Christian minorities like the Greeks and the Armenians). One such judge in Syria, still technically a Muslim and sitting on a bench of Koranic Law, not long ago had to acquit a young boy charged with the murder of his sister on a suspicion that she had spoiled the honor of the family. Yet before he let the boy go free he called him before the bar, took out a gospel, and read to him, in Arabic, the story of the woman taken in adultery, saying,

"You are a free man, but hear this before you go!"

There are numbers of such men and women all over the Near East—I think enough to surprise us if all were known.

The top circle is yet to be realized. That is when such persons can consciously come together, to form (in whatever form or under whatever name *they* must choose) a part of the Church Universal. It is still hardly believable to a Turk that a Turk *can* be a Christian—yet less conceivable that a Turk can be a better Turk for being a Christian. Yet in the perspective of the years, such a day is not too far off for us to work with patience, knowing that if we but sow faithfully, it is God who giveth the increase.

4) We must remember our ultimate goal of a Christian World. There is no such thing until the Near East can take its place; until the cradle of Christianity is again fairly represented in the Church; until the gospel is again better known at the Crossroads of the World. Many of our difficulties there come from our own mistakes in the past. Much of the opposition we meet there comes from the frustration and weakness that history has wrought. Let us remember our handicaps (including ourselves), and without forcing the hand of destiny work with patience and with faith for the realization of the promise that lies in such a significant part of the earth.

